



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**Ismaili Studies: A Summary Review**  
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**Abstract**

In the course of their long and complex history dating to the formative period of Islam, the Ismailis have often been accused of various heretical teachings and practices and a multitude of myths and misconceptions circulated about them. This is mainly because the Ismailis were, until the middle of the 20th century, studied and evaluated almost exclusively on the basis of the evidence collected or often fabricated by their enemies. It was only from the mid-20th century onwards that studies based on Ismaili sources came to dominate the field, leading to a much less biased understanding of the Ismailiyya.

**Keywords**

Ismaili Studies, Islamic Studies, Ismailiyya, Ismailis, Heresiography, Assassins, Assassin Legends, Shi'i Studies, Historiography, History, Nizaris.

**The Beginning of Anti-Ismaili Sentiments**

As the most revolutionary wing of Shi'ism with a religio-political agenda that aimed to uproot the 'Abbasids and restore the caliphate to a line of 'Alid imams, the Shi'i Ismailis aroused, from early on, the hostility of the Sunni Muslim majority. With the foundation of the Fatimid state in 909, the Ismaili challenge to the established order had become actualised, and thereupon the 'Abbasid caliphs and the Sunni 'ulama launched what amounted to an official anti-Ismaili propaganda campaign. The overall objective of this systematic and prolonged

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This article is also published as 'Ismaili Studies: Antecedents and Modern Developments,' *ISIM* (The International Institute of the Study of Islam in the Modern World) *Newsletter* No. 9 (January 2002), p. 37 and is available from the ISIM website, <http://www.isim.nl/>. For an extended version of the article, see Farhad Daftary's 'Ismaili Studies: Medieval Antecedents and Modern Developments,' available from [http://www.iis.ac.uk/research/academic\\_papers/ismaili\\_studies/ismaili\\_studies.htm](http://www.iis.ac.uk/research/academic_papers/ismaili_studies/ismaili_studies.htm).

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campaign was to discredit the entire Ismaili movement so that the Ismailis could be readily condemned as heretics or deviators from the true religious path. Anti-Ismaili polemical writings provided a major source of information for Sunni heresiographers, such as al-Baghdadi (d. 1037), who produced another important category of writing against the Ismailis.

By spreading a variety of defamations and even forged accounts, the anti-Ismaili authors in fact produced a 'black legend' in the course of the 10th century. Ismailism was now depicted as the arch-heresy of Islam carefully designed by some non-'Alid impostors or possibly even a Jewish magician disguised as a Muslim, aiming at destroying Islam from within. By the 11th century, this 'black legend', with its elaborate details and stages of initiation, had been accepted as an accurate and reliable description of Ismaili motives, beliefs and practices, leading to further anti-Ismaili polemics and heresiographical accusations.

### **Legendary Tales – Distorted Evaluations**

The revolt of the Persian Ismailis, led by Hasan Sabbah, against the Saljuq Turks, the new overlords of the 'Abbasids, called forth in the 1090s another vigorous Sunni reaction against the Ismailis in general and the Nizari Ismailis in particular. Hasan Sabbah (d. 1124) championed the cause of the Nizari branch of Ismailism and founded a state centred at the fortress of Alamut in northern Iran with a subsidiary in Syria. The Syrian Nizaris attained the peak of their power and fame under Rashid al-Din Sinan, who was their chief leader for some three decades until his death in 1193. It was in the time of Sinan, the original 'Old Man of the Mountain' of the Crusader sources, that occidental chroniclers of the Crusades and a number of European travellers and diplomatic emissaries began to write about the Nizari Ismailis. The Crusader circles and their occidental chroniclers, who were not interested in collecting accurate information about Islam as a religion and its internal divisions despite their proximity to Muslims, remained completely ignorant of Islam. It was under such circumstances that the Crusader circles produced reports about the secret practices of the Nizari Ismailis. Medieval Europeans themselves began to fabricate and put into circulation both in the Latin Orient and in Europe a number of tales about the secret practices of the Nizaris, who were made famous in Europe as the 'Assassins'. These so-called 'Assassin legends' consisted of a number of separate but interconnected tales, including the 'paradise legend', the 'hashish legend', and the 'deathleap legend'. The legends developed in stages, receiving new embellishments at each successive stage, and finally culminated in a synthesis popularised by Marco Polo (see F. Daftary. *The Assassin Legends*. I. B. Tauris, 1994). By the beginning of the 19th century, Europeans still perceived the Nizari Ismailis in an utterly confused and fanciful manner.

The orientalists of the 19th century, led by Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), began their more scholarly study of Islam on the basis of the Arabic manuscripts which were written mainly by Sunni authors. As a result, they studied Islam according to the Sunni viewpoint and, borrowing classifications applicable to Christian contexts, generally treated Shi'ism as the 'heterodox' interpretation of Islam by contrast to Sunnism which was taken to represent Islamic 'orthodoxy'. It was mainly on this basis, as well as the continued attraction of the seminal Assassin legends, that the orientalists launched their own study of the Ismailis.

Indeed, De Sacy's distorted evaluation of the Ismailis, though unintentional, set the frame within which other orientalists of the 19th century studied the medieval history of the Ismailis. As a result, misrepresentation and plain fiction came to permeate the first Western book on the Persian Nizaris of the Alamut period written by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall



(1774–1856). Originally published in German in 1818, von Hammer's book achieved great success in Europe and continued to be treated as the standard history of the Nizari Ismailis until the 1930s. With rare exceptions, notably Charles F. Deffrémery (1822–1883), who produced valuable historical studies on the Nizaris of Syria and Iran, and the studies of Michael J. de Goeje (1836–1909) on the dissident Qarmatis, the Ismailis continued to be misrepresented to various degrees by later orientalists. Meanwhile, Westerners had retained the habit of referring to the Nizari Ismailis as the Assassins, a misnomer rooted in a medieval pejorative appellation.

### **New Horizons**

The breakthrough in Ismaili studies occurred with the recovery and study of genuine Ismaili texts on a large scale — manuscript sources which had been preserved secretly in numerous private collections. A few Ismaili manuscripts of Syrian provenance had already surfaced in Paris during the 19th century, and some fragments of these works were studied and published there by S. Guyard and others. More Ismaili manuscripts preserved in Yemen and Central Asia were recovered in the opening decades of the 20th century. In particular, a number of Nizari texts were collected from Shughnan and other districts of Badakhshan (now divided by the Oxus River between Tajikistan and Afghanistan) and studied by Aleksandr A. Semenov (1873–1958), the Russian pioneer in Ismaili studies from Tashkent. However, by the 1920s knowledge of European scholarly circles about Ismaili literature was still very limited.

Modern scholarship in Ismaili studies was initiated in the 1930s in India, where significant collections of Ismaili manuscripts have been preserved in the Tayyibi Ismaili Bohra community. This breakthrough resulted mainly from the pioneering efforts of Wladimir Ivanow (1886–1970), and a few Ismaili Bohra scholars, notably Asaf A. A. Fyzee (1899–1981), Husayn F. al-Hamdani (1901–1962) and Zahid 'Ali (1888–1958), who based their studies on their family collections of manuscripts. Asaf Fyzee, in fact, made modern scholars aware of the existence of an independent medieval Ismaili school of jurisprudence. Ivanow, who eventually settled in Bombay after leaving his native Russia in 1917, collaborated closely with these Bohra scholars and succeeded, through his own connections within the Khoja community, to gain access to Nizari literature as well. Consequently, he compiled the first detailed catalogue of Ismaili works, citing some 700 separate titles which attested to the hitherto unknown richness and diversity of Ismaili literature and intellectual traditions (see W. Ivanow, *A Guide to Ismaili Literature*. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1933). This very catalogue provided a scientific frame for further research in the field. Ismaili scholarship received another major impetus through the research programmes of the Ismaili Society of Bombay, established in 1946 under the patronage of Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (1877–1957), the 48th *imam* of the Nizari Ismailis.

By 1963, when Ivanow published a revised edition of his catalogue (*Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey*), many more Ismaili sources had become known and progress in Ismaili studies had been truly astonishing. Numerous Ismaili texts had begun to be critically edited by scholars, preparing the ground for further progress in this new field of Islamic studies. In this connection, particular mention should be made of the Ismaili texts of Fatimid and later times edited together with analytical introductions by Henry Corbin, published simultaneously in Tehran and Paris in his *Bibliothèque Iranienne* series; and the Fatimid texts edited by the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Kamil Husayn and published in his *Silsilat Makhtutat al-Fatimiyyin* series in Cairo. At the same time, Arif Tamir edited a number of



Ismaili texts of Syrian provenance, and a few European scholars such as Marius Canard and several Egyptian scholars made important contributions to Fatimid studies.

By the mid-1950s, progress in the field had already enabled Marshall G. S. Hodgson to produce the first scholarly and comprehensive study of the Nizari Ismailis of the Alamut period (*The Order of Assassins*. The Hague: Mouton, 1955). Soon, others representing a new generation of scholars, notably Bernard Lewis, Samuel M. Stern, Wilferd Madelung and Abbas Hamdani produced major studies, especially on the early Ismailis and their relations with the dissident Qarmatis. Progress in Ismaili studies has proceeded at a rapid pace during the last few decades through the efforts of yet another generation of scholars such as Ismail K. Poonawala, Heinz Halm, Paul E. Walker, Azim A. Nanji and Thierry Bianquis. The modern progress in the recovery and study of Ismaili literature is well reflected in Professor Poonawala's monumental *Biobibliography of Isma'ili Literature* (Undena: Malibu, CA, 1977), which identifies some 1,300 titles written by more than 200 authors.

Modern scholarship in Ismaili studies promises to continue at an even greater pace as the Ismailis themselves are now becoming widely interested in studying their literary heritage and history — a phenomenon attested by an increasing number of Ismaili-related doctoral dissertations written in recent decades by Ismailis. In this context, a major role will be played by The Institute of Ismaili Studies, established in London in 1977 under the patronage of His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, the present *imam* of the Nizari Ismailis. This institution is already serving as the central point of reference for Ismaili studies while making its own contributions through various programmes of research and publications. Amongst these, particular mention should be made of the monographs appearing in the Institute's Ismaili Heritage Series which aims to make available to wide audiences the results of modern scholarship on the Ismailis and their intellectual and cultural traditions; and the Ismaili Texts and Translations Series in which critical editions of Arabic and Persian texts are published together with English translations. Numerous scholars worldwide participate in these academic programmes, and many more benefit from the accessibility of the Ismaili manuscripts found in the Institute's library, representing the largest collection of its kind in the West. With these modern developments, the scholarly study of the Ismailis, which by the closing decades of the 20th century had already greatly deconstructed the seminal anti-Ismaili legends of medieval times, promises to dissipate the remaining misrepresentations of the Ismailis rooted either in hostility or imaginative ignorance of the earlier generations.